

Facilitating Posttraumatic Growth

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1. What Is *Posttraumatic Growth*?

2. Posttraumatic Growth in Treatment

Posttraumatic Growth

positive change experienced
from the *struggle* with
major stressors

Idea of PTG Ancient

***But we also boast in
our sufferings,
knowing that suffering
produces character***

Romans 5:5

Even his griefs are a joy,
long after, to one that
remembers all that he
wrought and endured.

Homer, *The Odyssey*

20th Century Scholars

- Victor Frankl
- Humanistic psychology
- Gerald Caplan
- Irvin Yalom

Keep in Mind

high stress usually takes a
toll

When Mills returned home, he was distracted by cell phones, which insurgents use to detonate roadside bombs.

"You don't get through a day without thinking about it. No matter what I do, there's always something," said a postal worker who was hospitalized for 11 months after surviving a roadside bomb that detonated beneath his Humvee near Ramadi.

*"I prefer to stay in my house
and not do anything or see
anybody. I know soldiers want
to go back, but I am definitely
not one of those soldiers. I
don't want to die this young."*

"I am a more sensitive person, a more effective pastor, ... because of Aaron's ... death than I would ever have been without it. If I could choose ... I would forego all of the ... growth and depth which has come my way ... and be what I was ... [just] average ... the father of a bright, happy boy. But I cannot choose."

Rabbi Harold Kushner in Viorst, J. (1996) **Necessary Losses**. New York: Fawcett, p. 295.

Resilience vs. PTG

- Resilience = ability to *recover* readily
- PTG = a new level of functioning or a better way of being.

Major Domains of PTG

- Existential/Spiritual
- Relationships
- Self

Spirituality/Existential Changes

Greater appreciation

Changed priorities

Changed view of world

- *We [now] realize that life is precious.*
- *Things that seemed important before just seem so insignificant*

Changed Relationships

Since Harold died ...

*I have never been as close to
the children ...*

*I am more real and so are
they.*

*"We few, we happy few, we
band of brothers.*

*For he today that sheds his
blood with me*

Shall be my brother"

Shakespeare, Henry V

Changed Self

**“More vulnerable,
yet stronger”**

Your capacity to deal with any kind of severe ailment is probably much, much greater than you think.

Let me be the first to tell you: you are not the weak sister you think you are.

Alen Rucker, *The Best Seat in the House*

*In the depths of Winter, I
finally learned that
within me lay an
invincible Summer.*

Albert Camus

REMINDERS

- PTG is not universal
- PTG is also quite common
- PTG comes at a price
- PTG does not mean no symptoms



Combat-related PTG

Suggestive Evidence:

- Eitinger (1974): Some Concentration Camp survivors appeared to benefit from the experience.
- Strongest predictor = ability to make a few of one's own decisions.



Combat-related PTG

Suggestive Evidence:

- Ursano (1981) reported a case series of six Vietnam POWs and noted that one former POW “made significant career decisions and pursued his goals with a determination not noted in precaptivity evaluations.”



Combat-related PTG

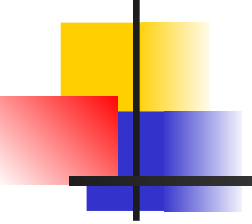
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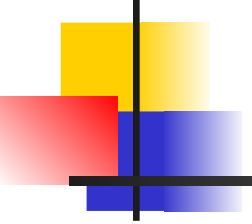
- Segal (1986): positive effects among American POWs held by N. Vietnam who perceived some sense of control.



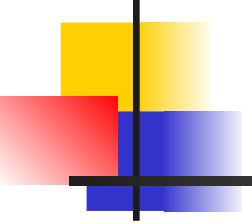
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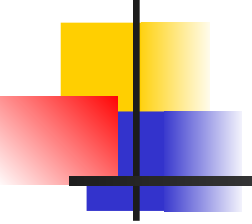
- Speed, Engdahl, and colleagues (1989) reported that
 - 47% of 62 former World War II POW's reported that they had benefited in some way from their POW experience.
 - Benefits included greater appreciation for freedom, a strong national defense, family, friends, and food.
 - Soldiers who were ranked more highly at the time of capture were more likely to report perceptions of benefit
 - Indicators of the severity of the POW experience and diagnoses of anxiety, depression, and PTSD were not related to PTG.

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- Sledge, Boydstun, & Rabe (1980): 221 USAF repatriated prisoners of the Vietnam War and 341 USAF pilots and navigators who were not POW's, three years after repatriation.
 - 61% of USAF repatriated Vietnam War POWs perceived their imprisonment experience as beneficial.
 - POW's reported significantly greater increases in desirable attitudes and behavior, (e.g., patience, ability to differentiate important from trivial);
 - and significantly greater decreases in undesirable attitudes and behavior (e.g. temper, pessimism) than controls, as a result of their Vietnam experiences.

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- Sledge, Boydstun, & Rabe (1980):
 - Those POW's reported significantly more physical and mental suffering during captivity than other POW's.
 - They also had more difficulties on repatriation and twice as high a divorce rate after return as other POW's.

POWs vs. non-POWs from Vietnam War

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- Predictors of growth using PTGI
 - Growth and other positive and negative outcomes
 - Longitudinal changes
 - (Sonis, Tedeschi, Sledge, Fairbank, Engdahl, Liberzon & Gillespie, in preparation)

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-
- Navy POWs (N=87) and controls (N=81)
 - Siblings of Navy POWs and controls (N=55)
 - Air Force POWs and controls
 - Sledge study in 1976 (N=562)



PTG Themes in Interviews

- Values/philosophy
 - Unimportance of money
 - Honesty/integrity
 - Freedom
 - Obligation
 - Giving to others
- Self-concept
 - Self-knowledge
 - Patience
 - Self-reliance
- Interpersonal relations
 - Compassion



Relationships with PTG

- Injury during evasion or captivity
- Suffering during combat or captivity
- Torture severity
- PTSD
- Helping others through disclosure
- Working on community problems or in politics
- Perceived helpfulness of homecoming escort



Rodman, Engdahl, Tedeschi, & Calhoun (2002)

- Administered PTGI to 21 WWII & Korean veterans with PTSD

3 highest factors:

- Appreciation for life (4.57)
- Personal strength (4.11)
- Relating to others (3.70)

4 highest items:

- Appreciating each day (4.86)
- An appreciation for the value of my life (4.71)
- A feeling of self-reliance (4.43)
- I discovered I was stronger than I thought (4.33)



Posttraumatic Growth in Clinical Practice

A more inclusive **framework** for
treating stress response

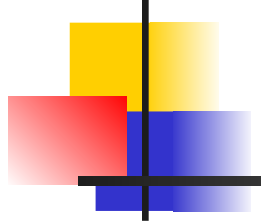
NOT A NEW “*SCHOOL*” OF
THERAPY

NOT A NEW “*TECHNIQUE*”



Posttraumatic Growth in Clinical Practice

The *Expert Companion*
Perspective



Expert Companionship

- A Model for working with the traumatized and bereaved.
- See Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004, *Helping Bereaved Parents*.
- Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006, *Handbook of Posttraumatic Growth*.



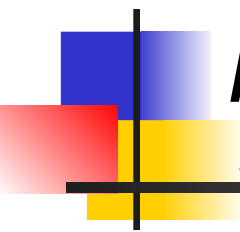
Why “Expert Companion?”

- Without companionship, expertise is hollow.
- Downplay expertise.
- Stories need to be told, and experiences need to be understood--this takes time and good listening.
- Therefore, this is a constructivist/narrative/existential/cognitive.....integrative approach



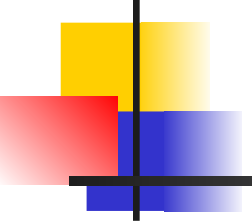
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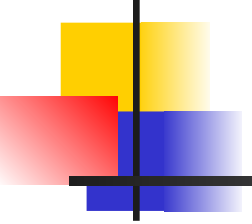
- Reasons to downplay expertise:
 - Every trauma and death is different.
 - People are experts on their own experience.
 - Cultural differences are important in trauma and grief.
 - Your humanity is crucial.
 - It takes the pressure off of you.

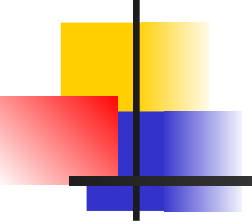



*Trauma survivors see the
limitations of their hard-won
“expertise.”*

From a mother who had
friends whose son was killed
about five years after her own
son:

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-
- *We got up the next morning and went to them. And it was really strange from the standpoint that I thought that I should have some great words of wisdom here. I've been there, I should know something.*

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-
- *And I found myself sitting there thinking I have no clue, as most people do not have a clue, who want to say something to somebody in a similar situation.*

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-
- *And if I could tell anybody anything if they are faced with a friend who is going through this, all you can do is say 'yeah I'm here, if you talk, we'll talk, if you don't, we won't.' That's all you can do, you can not take that pain from another person.*



Who is the “Expert Companion?”

- A person who listens to the worst.
- A person who learns from the client.
- A person who tolerates the “craziness.”
- A person who is there for the long haul.



Why an “Expert Companion?”

- High quality interactions.
- A clinician with the knowledge base about trauma and grief, but who realizes he or she doesn't have many answers.
- Other companions may not be there for the long haul.



The Combination: Expert Companions

- Companionship:
 - Sensitive
 - Courageous
 - Accepting
 - Aware of limits and ambiguity in the face of questions of life and death
- Expertise: Based on *research on trauma and grief and the teachings of the clients.*



Practice *humility*, and a new way of *listening*...

- Focus on listening, without necessarily trying to solve.
- Listen in a way that allows change in yourself, rather than being intent on doing the changing.



The underrated power of listening

A quote from Komp (1993), a pediatric oncologist:

For an agonizing hour he poured out his young-ancient soul. Then he rose from the chair with tears pouring down his face. “you’re the best doctor I’ve ever met,” he exclaimed. “No one has ever helped me as much as you have. How can I thank you?” I had never gotten to say a word to Jay. I had only listened.”



Don't be merely a symptom treater

- Don't stifle the possibility of growth by smothering all distress.
- But help with coping/surviving before growth.



Practice careful acknowledgement of PTG

- Notice growth as the client approaches it.
- Acknowledge and reinforce the experience of growth when it is articulated by the client, but *not prematurely*.
- Reinforce the reasonable positive interpretations of growth coming from the struggle with trauma when the client makes them.



Remember the pre-existing strengths

- Old crises can also provide a fruitful source for recognizing growth that the individual has already experienced. Help the client construct a new set of beliefs about self using the evidence of adaptive coping with trauma.
- *“I’ve noticed something in you that you tend to overlook in yourself.”*



Don't sound stupid

- Guard against offering platitudes about what wonderful opportunities traumas are.
- Refer to growth caused by the client's struggle to survive and come to terms with what has happened.
- Your credibility is all-important!



Stupidity, continued

- Are some events too horrible? Check out survivors' willingness to think in terms of posttraumatic growth by saying,
- *"Some people I've worked with have said that they have changed in some good ways as they went through things like this. Do you think that is possible for you, given the things you went through?"*
- Encourage contact with others who have also had these experiences.



Making Connections

- Friends or family if possible.
- Help others.
- Faith-based organizations.
- Web-based groups.



Help Survivors see Trauma as Surmountable

- What happened can't be changed-- but your response to it can.
- Help survivors notice subtle ways they have already changed.
- Is it possible for the future to be better in any way?



Help Survivors Accept Change

- Help survivors disengage from unattainable goals.
- Consider new possibilities.
- What small accomplishments are possible *now*?
- Focus on these things rather than that which seems impossible.



Take Action, and Don't

- Decisive actions are good, but only when clients are ready or very close to it.
- Tolerating inaction can also be important. Be patient with trauma survivors, and help them gauge the distinction between patience and avoidance.



Cultivate a Hopeful Outlook

- Keep the focus on what is wanted.
- Keep the focus off of what is feared.
- Give survivors something to hold on to in order to maintain this perspective.



Tolerance: Cultural and individual considerations

- Respect and work within the trauma survivor's framework.
- Tolerate “positive illusions.” Don't underestimate people's capabilities
- Be willing to explore spiritual or religious views.



Listen for what will resonate

- Think and sometimes speak in stories and metaphors, given how difficult it can be to put into words the experiences of trauma and growth.



Enjoy the personal benefits that come from

- the work
- If you approach the trauma survivors with whom you work *humbly, attentively*, and with *respect* your reward will be
 - Vicarious posttraumatic growth-- wisdom for everyday life and your own traumas.



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